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ABSTRACT

Although women are entering the work force in record numbers, little is known about their work lives. An understanding of educated women's attributions as to the reasons for changes in their work history and the effect of these attributions on work experience is needed. A secondary analysis was conducted for a longitudinal data set consisting of womens' responses (N=169) to a 1963 survey and to a 1975 follow-up survey. The coding system categorized the responses according to external circumstances, physical or psychological state, other people, intent/purpose/goal, job characteristic, preference/belief/attitude, and job definition. Results indicated that the reasons given by educated women for job changes were systematically related to their labor force participation, but not to income. Women who worked less used more excuses and offered fewer justifications for their job changes. (Author/NRB)

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Women's Reasons for Job Changes[1]

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Most of us can remember our first job. And we remember it, in part, because our first job tends not to be our last. Job changes are a regular feature of working life and almost as regular is the need to explain why certain jobs have been left and others have been taken in their stead. Queries about job changes are ubiquitous and answers obligatory. In fact, giving reasons for actions seems often to count for more than the actions themselves. We are expected to have had reasons for changes or at least to be able to give, in retrospect, a satisfactory rendering of why we have acted the way we have. The present study has to do with exploring the reasons that highly educated women give for job changes over the course of their working lives. More specifically, the aim of the research is increased understanding of how educated women attribute the reasons for changes in their work history and how these attributions affect and are affected by real work experience. In order to do this, a secondary analysis was undertaken of a longitudinal data set entitled, "Life styles of educated women" (Ginzberg, 1966). This particular data set consists of responses to two surveys, the first survey being done in 1963 and the second survey being done in 1975. The women respondents were in graduate school approximately 12 to 17 years before the first survey was conducted.

Background

There are a number of reasons for studying "reasons" that people give regarding changes in their employment histories. The first of these has to do with exploring the relation between self attributions and employment experience of an important but neglected population. Women are entering the work force in record numbers (Smith, 1979), yet we know little about their work lives. There is need to know how women explain to themselves and to others work-related outcomes and what is the relation of these explanations to employment patterns. Research suggests that attributions are instrumental in affecting feelings about

current actions and in influencing expectations around future actions (Weiner, Russell and Lerman, 1978). Consequently there is reason to explore whether self attributions concerning work affect women's orientation to and participation in the world of work.

A second set of reasons for studying reasons is more theoretical in nature. Attributions are frequently thought of as discrete events that, once made, remain relatively fixed. Research is needed to explore change in attributions over time and to chart the role of attribution as either contributors to and/or outcomes of work experience. To a considerable extent, research efforts into issues such as these have been hampered by the unavailability of longitudinal data which permit investigation of the unfolding of the relation between self understanding and real world outcomes. The present study describes data showing the relation between change in reasons for taking and leaving particular employment as a function of change in labor force participation over time.

Finally, reasons themselves are frequently quite complex and deserving of greater scrutiny. The present study examined respondent's free responses to questions asking for reasons for taking and leaving every job held. A coding scheme is described which aimed to probe the presumed multidimensional aspect of reason giving.

Development of the Coding System for Reason Type

How should we think about the reasons that people give for changes in their work history? One possibility would be to ask whether reasons differ according to whether they reflect familial or career concerns. Another approach, suggested by attribution theory in social psychology, is to ascertain whether reasons or causes can be grouped not so much by their content but by their focus. In other words, we can ask whether the offered explanations seem to represent an internal versus an external orientation. For example, explanations may reflect a consideration internal to the reason-giver such as "personal fulfillment" or external to the

reason-giver such as "a good job offer."

In the framework of attribution research, perceived locus of causality has been frequently cited as an important dimension. Heider (1958) as well as Jones and Davis (1965) have emphasized the attributor's distinction between causes located in the external world and those located in the person's "true nature." Kelley (1967) also asserted that in the interpretation of behavior the prominent perceived causes are the person, the entity toward which the behavior is directed, and the circumstances surrounding the behavior. According to these theorists, an outcome is perceived to be caused by some combination of personal characteristics and environmental forces. The person may have done something because she had to do it, the environmental forces being unusually strong or because she wanted to do it, internal features being strong enough to cause the behavior within the existing environment. Apparently, this determination affects achievement behavior. The findings from experimental studies suggest that attribution of outcomes to internal rather than to external reasons is related to subsequent differences in future expectancy for success, aspiration level, persistence, and a sense of personal efficacy (Lefcourt, 1966). Moreover, there is evidence that women are more likely than men to externalize causality, that is to see events as having been brought about by agents and forces beyond a person's control (Deaux, 1976).

On the basis of this work, we decided initially to categorize the open-ended responses in the longitudinal data set along the single internal-external causal locus dimension. For example, if a reason for taking a job was "its location" then it was to be coded as external, while a reason of "wanting to learn new skills" would be coded as internal.

But this apparently simple and well-established idea proved less than adequate when we faced the actual free-form responses. More specifically, the way in which the reason was phrased seemed to vary more than the reason's particular focus. In other words, the reason of "having a child" could be variously phrased

as "I wanted to have a baby" or "pregnancy" or "I got pregnant." The focus is internal in all of these cases yet the psychological orientation appears different in each one. In the first case, a goal or intention is indicated, whereas in the third case, a relatively more passive voice is used. Consequently, a new coding strategy was devised which sustained some of the initial concern with cataloguing reasons according to "presses" coming from within and without but which sought to give greater weight to the respondent's stance toward these presses in terms of the language actually employed.

The resulting coding system consisted of seven (7) categories:

1) External or Extenuating Circumstances (EC) which describes external events or circumstantial occurrences that prompted or inhibited the job taking or leaving but which were not aspects of the job itself such as "my husband was transferred" or "motherhood." Also included were instances in which the respondent was the object of someone else's action such as having been "promoted" or "fired" or doing that which "I was trained for," as well as passive phrasing which suggested the presence of external forces such as "I moved with my boss."

2) Respondent's Physical or Psychological State (PS) which describes some ongoing physical condition such as "illness" or "pregnancy" or some relatively enduring psychological state such as "depressed" or "bored at home."

3) Other People (OP) describes the reason as being the result of some action by specific others that affected the job leaving or taking, such as "my boss took me with him" or "my husband felt better about my not working."

4) Intent/Purpose/Goal (IPG) describes the reason as being a goal or a means to a goal such as "to go to college" or "I wanted more experience" or "to develop a special program." The purpose or goal need not be job related. For example, the reason "to take some time off" or "to be with my family some more" would also be coded as IPG.

5) Job Characteristic (JC) describes some characteristic of the work itself that

was influential in making the job change including, but not limited to, salary, schedule, working conditions or location. Examples would be "it was closer to home" or "good supervisor." Also included in the job characteristic category were assessments of the job's general advantages or disadvantages without personal reference such as "a fine opportunity."

6) Actor's Preference/Belief/Attitude (APB) describes the respondent's preference, considered judgment or evaluation through specific self reference such as "I preferred teaching to administration" or implied self focus, such as "liked staying at home." Also included in this Preference/Belief/Attitudes category would be statment of the respondent's beliefs or obligations, such as "I thought it was the best thing to do at the time" and "it was my duty."

7) Job Definition (JD) describes some feature inherent in the job description rather than to some appealing or unappealing aspect, such as "medical residency" or "summer employment" or "one year visiting appointment."

In sum, each reason was coded into one of these seven categories on the basis of the ordinary language actually used by the respondent. In terms of the earlier example of having a baby, the response was coded as "Intent/Purpose/Goal" if the reason was phrased as "I wanted to have a baby" but was coded as "Physical or Psychological State" if the reason was cast as "pregnancy." If the reason was instead, "I got pregnant," the "Extenuating or External Circumstances" category was applied.

Respondents

The data for the study were collected from two samples: the first contains 238 women (response rate of 75%) surveyed during the initial wave of the study in 1963 and the second consists of a sample of 169 of the original respondents surveyed 12 years later in 1975 (follow-up response rate of 71%). An analysis of the non-response bias of the second questionnaire based on early questionnaire data found no apparent differences between those who were and were not available

for the second wave. The women were initially selected from graduate department and professional schools (11 in all) at Columbia University during the period from 1945-1951 by virtue of being fellowship recipients or members of honorary societies. Only those women who were available at both time points, namely 169 respondents, are included in the present study. While this sample can in no sense be considered representative of the general population, these women do constitute an important sample in their concern with work and achievement. Consequently, the sample is a particularly apt one for an investigation of the relation between self perceptions and career advancement.

Procedure

The reason-giving responses were coded from sections in both data sets which asked the respondents to give their employment history in the years preceding 1963 and between 1963 and 1975. Alongside each job description, space was provided for indicating the reasons for taking and leaving it.

Every reason was coded for every job held. Since the median age in 1963 at the time of the first testing was 40, the work history frequently covered a period of over 30 years. In order to avoid bias due to those who made frequent job changes prior to 1963, the decision was made to set a maximum and equal number of jobs to be coded at each time point. Working backwards from the testing point, a maximum of 4 jobs was selected for coding, resulting in a maximum of 8 jobs across the two interview times. Only 20% of the sample had more jobs than this and reasons for these jobs were not included in the final analyses.

Two coders were trained in the reason-giving coding system to a minimum reliability of 80% agreement with the developer of the system. Reliability checks of the two coders on the protocols themselves resulted in correlations of .89 and .94 respectively.

Each reason was coded into one and only one of the categories but respondents could have more than one category for each job taking or leaving due to the fact that more than one reason could be offered for each choice. A respondent thus

received a score on each of the 7 categories at both testing points (1963 and 1975) which was the product of dividing the total number of times that each category was mentioned by the number of jobs taken and left.

Results

Relations among reason categories. As you recall, the assumption behind the use of several categories in the coding of the reasons was that of multidimensionality. As such, one of the first steps in the data analysis involved assessing the degree of relation among the categories. High correlations would question this assumption and would call for the reduction of categories to fewer groupings. For example, if two or more categories showed high intercorrelations among themselves, then there would be little need to keep separate categories. However, low intercorrelations would indicate that the distinctions were important and worth keeping.

Correlation and factor analyses were performed on the reason scores to reveal the pattern of associations. The notable aspect of the resulting relation was the lack of significant correlations (positive or negative) among the categories. For example, the category EC (External or Extenuating Circumstance) is decidedly external as is JC (Job Characteristics), yet the correlation between them was low and nonsignificant (r = .10). Similarly, the category PS (Physical or Psychological State) describes an internal disposition as does the category APB (Attitude/Preference/Belief), yet the correlation between them was also nonsignificant (r = .13). The clear exception to this general pattern of nonassociation was a significant negative correlation between Extenuating Circumstances and Intent/Purpose/Goal (r = -.42). The relation here seems to reflect less a clear internal-external distinction than an intentionality dimension. Extenuating or external circumstances reflected unintended occurences whereas IPG gave voice to explicit and sought-after outcomes.

Factor analysis showed also that each of the seven categories was virtually independent of the others, save again for the opposite loadings on one factor

of EC and IPG. Thus it appears that for this data set, reasons are better understood not as falling along a single internal-external scale but as reflecting in everyday language the varied issues or multiple concerns that the women respondents felt to be operating at the time of the job change. Consequently in the subsequent analyses relating work experience to reason giving, each reason category is used as a separate dependent measure.

Reason Giving and Work Experience

In order to examine the relation between giving and work experience across time, regression equations were performed using change scores as the dependent and predictor variables. In terms of work experience, three aspects were regressed on each of the seven reason categories. The three work dimensions included: 1) annual income in hundreds of dollars, 2) total number of hours worked weekly in salaried employment, self employment and other paid employment, and 3) work pattern, measured on a four point scale ranging from one for withdrawn from the work force to 4 for continuous full time employment. Total work hours in 1963 and work pattern in 1963 were included as control variables. Also included in the regression equations were changes between 1963 and 1975 in marital status and number of children.

As shown in Table 1, the reasons which highly educated women give for job changes are systematically related to their labor force participation but not to income. Specifically, four different reasons were found to relate systematically to change in the number of hours worked. For those women who increased the number of hours they worked in a week between 1963 and 1975, there was a corresponding decrease in their use of the external or extenuating circumstances category and also a decrease in the use of the physical or psychological state category. In other words, an increased work week led to a decreased use of extenuating circumstances or physical/psychological conditions or reasons affecting job changes during that time period. On the other hand, this same increase in hours worked resulted in increases in giving intentions or purposes as well as increases in

describing aspects of the job itself. It appears that in increasing the time commitment to work, the less these women excused the job changes on the basis of extenuating circumstances whether incidental or personal and the more likely they justified the change on the basis of their goals or the work itself. Said the other way around, women who worked less used more excuses and less justifications for the job changes. These changes were significant even when early labor force participation was controlled for.

The lack of any significant relations between income and reason giving may be as interesting as the presence of the relations for hours worked. Income may not affect reason giving because it is less under the respondents' control or influence than their work time. Women can increase their hours more easily than they can increase what they get paid.

With regard to marital status, movement from a single to a married state resulted in a decreased use of the intention category and an increase in mention of job characteristics as well as one's own attitudes and beliefs. Apparently being married reduces the need to explain job changes on the basis of goals being sought and increases the inclination to justify the change on the basis of something about the work itself or one's feeling about the work.

Conclusions

In conclusion, these findings have implications for two sets of issues: the first has to do with the theoretical stance of how best to conceptualize the attributions that people give for past actions and the second is concerned with understanding the role of work in the lives of highly educated women.

As to how best to conceptualize reasons, the present results show there is validity to the strategy which catalogues reasons multidimensionally according to the way the reasons are actually cast. This is in line with recent criticisms of attribution theory (Buss, 1978) which have argued that there is a qualitative difference between ordinary language explanations of human action and the causal

explanations used by the sciences. It appears that much can be gained by paying more attention to the "lay explanation."

As to the issue of understanding work in the lives of highly educated women, analysis of the longitudinal data has shown that work-related self perceptions are less a contributor to real work experience than they are an outcome of that experience. A change in objective circumstances calls for a change in the subjective rationale for those circumstances. For those women who worked less, the proffered reasons reflected their predicaments and plights; for those who worked more, the reasons reflected instead their purposes and preferences.

It appears then that the past is being continually remade but we would do well in understanding women's work to attend more to the nature of the past if we are to make sense of the revisions we find.

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Footnotes

[1]This study was conducted while the author was a Mellon Scholar at the Murray Research Center at Radcliffe College. The original questionnaires on which the analyses were conducted are archived at the Murray Research Center.

[2]The author wishes to thank Abigail Stewart who assisted in the development of the coding system and Brinton Lykes who was involved in the coding of the responses and the analysis of the results.

Table 1

Regression Results and (t-ratios) - The effects of changes in selected aspects of work experience on changes in reasons for job changes

Aspect of 1963-1975 work experience	Change in reason category						
	EC	PS	OP	IPG	JC	APB	JD
Change in income	.003 (.02)	-.033 (-.34)	.026 (.24)	-.118 (-1.16)	.140 (1.35)	.097 (-.93)	.033 (.33)
Change in work hours	-.220 (-1.70)*	-.376 (-3.10)***	-.081 (-.62)	.318 (2.53)***	.200 (1.58)*	.016 (.12)	.148 (-1.19)
Change in work pattern	.086 (.67)	.004 (.04)	-.114 (-.88)	-.126 (-1.02)	-.055 (-.44)	.167 (1.32)	-.160 (-1.30)
Change in marital status	-.069 (-.72)	-.041 (-.46)	.002 (.02)	-.162 (-1.79)*	.162 (1.73)*	.183 (1.94)**	-.054 (.58)
Change in number of kids	-.010 (-.10)	.062 (.68)	-.044 (-.46)	-.045 (-.48)	.133 (1.41)	.165 (1.74)*	.263 (2.83)***
Total work hours 1963	-.022 (-.11)	.006 (.03)	-.280 (-1.43)	.189 (1.00)	.097 (.51)	.063 (.33)	.256 (-1.36)
Work Pattern 1963	.086 (.45)	.084 (.47)	.168 (.88)	-.157 (-.85)	-.173 (.93)	.014 (.08)	-.060 (-.33)
R^2	.050	.171	.050	.115	.098	.089	.125

* $p < .1$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$